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## ABSTRACT

A study investigated non-native instructors' communication behaviors as perceived by their students. Subjects, 81 undergraduate students on 2 campuses of a state university in the northern United States, responded to a questionnaire. The results of qualitative and quantitative analyses indicated that U.S. students' feeling about non-native instructors was mixed. Though being recognized as an asset to U.S. education, non-native instructors were expected to improve their language proficiency and cultural understanding. A student's previous contact with people from other cultures was found to have positively influenced the way he or she perceived the clarity of non-native instructors' messages. In addition, a significant gender effect was identified on perceived organization of their non-native instructors' messages. (Contains 2 tables of data and 20 references.) (Author/RS)

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Communication Differences between Native and  
Non-native Instructors As Perceived by U.S. Students

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**Abstract:**

**Communication Differences between Native and  
Non-native Instructors As Perceived by U.S. Students**

Though communication problems between U.S. college student and their non-native instructors have been reported in previous research, U.S. students' perception toward the communication behaviors of non-native instructors are unexplored. The purpose of this study was to investigate non-native instructors' communication behaviors as perceived by their students. The results of qualitative and quantitative analyses indicated that U.S. students' feeling about non-native instructors was mixed. Though being recognized as an asset to U.S. education, non-native instructors were expected to improve their language proficiency and cultural understanding. A student's previous contact with people from other cultures was found to have positively influenced the way he or she perceived the clarity of non-native instructors' messages. In addition, a significant gender effect was identified on perceived organization of their non-native instructors' messages.

Communication Differences between Native and  
Non-native Instructors As Perceived by U.S. Students

The U.S. society is becoming more and more interculturally inclined. Most major corporations have connections to every corner of the earth. Many people work with cultures that are different than their own. This cosmopolitanism is also prevalent in U.S. universities and colleges where there are many international students and instructors. Among the international students, some are graduate teaching assistants who independently teach undergraduate-level courses. Others, after graduation, have become professors on U.S. campuses. These non-native instructors can offer new concepts and ideas in every field of study in ways that a native teacher could not. They also can be an important part of a U.S. college student's preparation for the international work force of today and tomorrow.

While non-native instructors can be an asset to U.S. higher education, previous studies report numerous communication problems in connection with their instructions. Many of the studies focus on the difficulties that international (non-native English speaking) teaching assistants (ITA) have experienced with their U.S. students due to their different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (e.g., Bailey, 1984; Bauer, 1991; Franck & Desousa, 1982; Ross & Krider, 1992). Bailey (1984) notes that the most frequently cited difficulties were cultural differences, finding the right word to express one's idea, pronunciation, general

communication problems, and a lack of trust from their students (p. 7). Based on interviews, Wang (1993) identifies the following difficulties encountered by professors of Chinese origin who teach in U.S. universities: using the American English, encountering the campus culture, and establishing rapport with their students. In addition, numerous training programs have been introduced to improve the teaching effectiveness of ITAs (e.g., Bailey & Hinofotis, 1984; Civikly & Muchisky, 1991; Gaskill & Brinton, 1984; Rice, 1984; Smith, 1987).

There have been some studies that research how students perceive the situation with their non-native instructor. For example, Bailey (1984) writes that U.S. students and their parents have voiced many complaints about the ITAs' language proficiency. Briggs and Hofer (1991), however, found that after two terms of teaching at University of Michigan, new ITAs were not rated differently from new U.S. teaching assistants. They note that "how ITAs are perceived may be related to the tolerance of undergraduates of individuals of different cultural backgrounds" (p. 444). Rubin and Smith (1990) discovered that ITAs' ethnicity and lecture topics tend to be more potent determinants of the attitude and comprehension of undergraduate students, than is their actual speaking proficiency. Therefore ITAs and U.S. undergraduate students seem to "co-own" the problem. Their study also suggests that "the more often students had sat in classes with

NNSTAs [non-native English-speaking teaching assistants] the more satisfied they were with their instruction and the more skilled they became at listening to accented speech" (p. 350).

The previous studies suggest that the problem between non-native instructors and U.S. students is not simply due to a language barrier. It is instead a multi-faceted problem associated with intercultural communication in a specific context. Costantino (1987) points out that "In spite of the fact that there are many language training programs [for ITAs], the issue of intercultural communication and cultural differences between ITAs and their students is also of importance" (p. 298). Althen (1991) emphasizes the importance of teaching "culture" to ITAs:

Practitioners realized that, given a certain level of English proficiency, a TA's performance depended as much on "culturally appropriate behavior" as on the ability to pronounce English the way the natives do. (p. 350)

In their factor analysis of U.S. business people's intercultural effectiveness in China, Cui and Awa (1992) also found that the factor "interpersonal skills" contributed the largest portion of the variance (24.9%) in the dimension of job performance (p. 319). This factor includes "the abilities to speak Chinese, to establish relationship, to maintain relationships, to initiate interaction with a stranger, and knowledge of the Chinese culture" (pp. 319-320).

Though problems in communication between non-native instructors and U.S. students have been explored in previous research, most of them have been done from the instructor's perspective. While U.S. students' complaints and evaluations have been reported, their perceptions toward non-native instructors regarding specific communication behaviors are unaddressed. Unless "culturally inappropriate" communication behaviors of non-native instructors as perceived by U.S. students are identified, it is difficult to obtain a concrete picture of the problem and to offer any practical solution to it. Furthermore, it is also important to know whether a student's gender and background tend to influence how he or she perceive the communication behaviors of non-native instructors. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate how "deviant" non-native instructors tend to be while communicating with their U.S. students as perceived by those students, and whether the gender difference and previous contact with people from other cultures will influence how non-native instructors' communication behaviors are perceived. More specifically, answers to the following five research questions were sought:

1. What is U.S. students' general feeling about non-native instructors?
2. What are the communication differences between native and non-native instructors as perceived by U.S. students?

3. Is there any difference within U.S. students in terms of their perception toward the communication behaviors of nonnative instructors due to gender and previous contact with people from other cultures?

4. What do U.S. students think they could do to improve the current situation?

5. What do U.S. students think those non-native instructors could do to improve the current situation?

Answers to the questions 1, 2, 4, and 5 were obtained through open-ended items in the survey, while the question 3 was answered through some quantitative procedures.

#### INSTRUMENT

A questionnaire was constructed to elicit responses pertaining to the five research questions. There are three types of questions included in the questionnaire: (a) questions regarding respondent's background (demographic data and previous contact with non-native people), (b) open questions (the research questions 1, 2, 4, and 5), and (c) specific (lower-inference) communication-related questions to be answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The data obtained from (a) and (c) were statistically analyzed for answering the research question 3.

Previous studies on intercultural communication competence or effectiveness were reviewed in order to determine what specific communication-related questions should be included in the questionnaire (e.g. Imahori & Lanigan,

1989; Martin & Hammer, 1989; Olebe & Koester, 1989). Many of the measuring items introduced in these studies were nonetheless found irrelevant to this study, such as "Try to speak other's language" (non-native instructors' use of English to teach is assumed) and "Share information about own country/culture" (this normally applies only to the first day of class) (Martin & Hammer, 1989). The behavioral categories that Davis (1987) established in his study on ITA training have offered a good reference to the questions regarding verbal behavior. However, nonverbal behavior is represented by only one item ("Looks at the class when teaching"). Therefore, the nonverbal categories introduced by Byrd et al. (1989, pp. 58-59) were considered to fill this void. After various items were considered and consolidated, ten distinctive communication-related items were formulated for subjects to respond to on a Likert-type scale. They cover the following issues: (a) the suitability of teaching style, (b) the ability to use the English language, (c) the ability to speak clearly, (d) the organization of messages, (e) the appropriateness of personal information sharing, (f) the receptivity to students' feedback, (g) listening, (h) the use of eye contact, (i) the use of facial expression, and (j) the use of gesture.

#### SUBJECTS

Eighty-one undergraduate students ( $M$  age = 20.6 years,  $SD$  = 2.7 years) on two campuses of a state university in the

northern United States were asked to respond to the questionnaire. Approximately half of them were female ( $n = 42$ ) and half were male ( $n = 39$ ). They were all Caucasians born and raised in the U.S. They had all taken at least one college-level course from a non-native instructor. Twenty-five of them had more than one non-native instructor. The background of their non-native instructors covers a wide range of languages and cultures, from Africa and Asia to Latin America and Europe.

#### PROCEDURE

To elicit subjects, a research assistant visited undergraduate classes and both on-campus and off-campus student housing units. Only those who had taken at least one college-level course from a non-native instructor were asked to respond to the questionnaire. In addition, the following arrangements were made intentionally to prevent confounding factors: (a) The research assistant was a Caucasian native student, (b) subjects were elicited in the absence of any non-native instructor, and (c) subjects were assured of the confidentiality of their identity.

#### ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE DATA

All answers to the four open questions were first carefully reviewed before the theme in each answer was extracted. A large table which incorporated a summary for the extracted themes was then produced for comparison and calculation of the frequency in repeated themes.

### ANALYSIS OF QUANTITATIVE DATA

In order to answer the third research question, a 2 (Gender) X 2 (With/Without Previous Contact with People from Other Cultures) MANOVA was conducted. Dependent measures were ten 5-point, Likert-type communication-related items. Since the items were an explicit representation of the ten pre-selected communication topics, such as "The instructor used appropriate facial expressions to reinforce his/her ideas," their validity was assumed. The reliability was at the acceptable level (Cronbach's Alpha = .82). In addition, the normal probability plot and homogeneity-of-variance tests detected no violation of these assumptions for the MANOVA procedure.

### RESULTS

#### Research Question 1

Three main themes emerged from the analysis of the answers to the first research question. Twenty-four subjects mentioned that it was difficult to understand their non-native instructors verbally. Twelve of them thought that these instructors are an asset because they bring "diversity," "insight," or a "refreshing atmosphere" to the classroom. In addition, 15 noted that non-native instructors are "very knowledgeable."

#### Research Question 2

In addressing what makes non-native instructors different from native ones, 49 of the 81 subjects mentioned verbal

barriers, which made them "hard to understand," such as accent. Thirteen reported nonverbal differences. Twelve of them referred to different classroom skills or styles. Furthermore, six said that their non-native instructor was "cold" or became frustrated when asked to clarify concepts. Only five wrote "no difference" or "little difference."

### Research Question 3

Two male subjects were excluded in the MANOVA procedure due to their failure to complete the Likert-type items. This elimination yielded a total of 42 female and 37 male subjects in the analysis. The MANOVA detected a significant multivariate effect for gender differences, (Wilks'  $\lambda = .76$ ,  $F[10, 65] = 2.05$ ,  $p = .04$ ). The eigenvalue is .32 and the square of the canonical correlation is .49. In other words, about 24% of the variability in discriminant scores is attributable to between-gender differences ( $.49^2 = .24$ ). However, when univariate  $F$ -tests were conducted, the gender effect was found significant only on the perceived "organization of messages" ( $F[1, 74] = 7.72$ ,  $p = .007$ ) among the 10 dependent measures. While the male subjects tended to agree that their non-native instructors spoke in an organized fashion, the female ones tended to be "undecided" about the judgment.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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No significant multivariate effect was produced for previous contact or interaction between gender and previous contact. ANOVAs for each dependent measure, nevertheless, detected a significant effect for previous contact on "the clarity of messages" ( $F[1, 74] = 4.48, p = .038$ ). Those who had previous contact with people from other cultures perceived their non-native instructor's messages to be clearer than those who had no such contact.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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#### Research Question 4

Among the 81 students, 31 expressed hope that non-native instructors can improve their language proficiency. Twelve wrote that these instructors need to become more familiar with the U.S. culture. Nonverbal improvement was also mentioned by five of them. Only 10 noted that nothing needs to be changed.

#### Research Question 5

When asked what they can do to improve the situation, 18 subjects mentioned "listen carefully." The other 18 suggested "outside help" if it is difficult to understand in class. Twelve of them made a remark of "be patient." Only 11 of them wrote that nothing can be done on their side.

## DISCUSSION &amp; CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of both the qualitative and quantitative data collected for this study, the following conclusions can be made:

First, U.S. students' general feeling about non-native instructors, as suggested in this study, seems to be mixed. On one hand, many of the subjects pointed out their difficulty in understanding non-native instructors. On the other hand, many acknowledged these instructors as being an asset to their college education. In comparison with previous studies (e.g., Bailey, 1984), the picture of a more positive relationship between U.S. college students and their non-native instructors seems to have emerged in this study. There were more positive (27) than negative (24) themes being identified. The only "harsh" criticism about non-native instructors was "Avoid them." Among negative comments, many were quite "mild," such as "They're O.K. as long as I can understand them." This is probably due to the multiculturalism that has been promoted on many U.S. campuses for many years. However, it is also doubtful whether the results of this study, which concentrated on the teaching of full-time non-native instructors, can be compared with those focused on ITAs.

Second, as reported in previous studies, the predominant factor that separates non-native instructors from native ones is a language barrier. More than a half of the subjects (49) identified it as a major difference between native and non-

native instructors. In addition, nonverbal differences, classroom skills, and class procedures (e.g., how to handle students' questions) also constituted a large proportion of the total account (31 out of 81). This result reveals a joint effect of linguistic and cultural barriers impinged negatively upon non-native instructors' teaching.

Third, the results from the MANOVA indicate that a U.S. student's perception toward the clarity of his or her non-native instructor's messages is positively influenced by his or her previous contact with people from other cultures. This finding is consistent with what Rubin and Smith (1990) have proposed. Rubin and Smith (1990) suggest that the more often a student sits in classes with non-native instructors, the more satisfied he or she tends to be with their instruction, and the more skilled he or she becomes at listening to accented speech. This study shows that any kind of previous contact with people from other cultures can create the same effect. The MANOVA also detected a significant gender effect on the perceived organization of non-native instructors' messages. There are two possible explanations for this variation. First, the female students had a higher expectation of language efficiency from their non-native instructors than did male students, so they "agreed" to a lesser degree than the male students. Secondly, the female students were less sensitive to the organization of messages

than male students, so they tended to choose "undecided" instead of "agree" about the judgment.

Fourth, non-native instructors are expected to brush up on their verbal skills and to become more familiar with the U.S. culture and teaching styles. This wish list prepared by U.S. students suggest that there are many things that non-native instructors can do to improve their linguistic knowledge and cultural understanding.

Finally, the students involved in this study provided a useful guideline for themselves. For example, they think they can listen more carefully and seek "outside help." Non-native instructors can also use these suggestions as a guideline to improve their teaching effectiveness. It is probably much easier for a non-native instructor to keep longer office hours and to encourage students to visit his or her office to ask questions, than to improve his or her language proficiency. He or she should also try to speak as clearly as possible and give more time for students to ask questions in class.

This study has at least two possible limitations. First, the size of the subjects was relatively small. This was largely because only those who had taken courses from non-native instructors could be included in the study. To compensate for this shortcoming, a special effort has been taken to avoid a biased sampling procedure. For example, an approximately equal number of male and female subjects was included. In addition, various academic fields were

represented by the subjects. However, the small sample size could still have made the MANOVA procedures less differentiating. Second, due to the relatively small sample size, some variables could not be controlled in the analysis, such as the gender and the national origin of the non-native instructor, and the subject taught by the instructor. Whether they are important variables is left unanswered in this study.

This study does disclose that the "old problem" still exists, however, a coordinated effort seems to have been taken by U.S. college students and their non-native instructors to improve their intercultural communication. Non-native instructors are no longer viewed as a burden to the system. Instead, both the liability and asset are taken into account. The findings of this study seem to indicate that they are more of an asset than a liability to most U.S. students. Their contributions to the U.S. education is largely recognized by their students. Then the important question is how the two groups can orchestrate a better learning situation. This study has provided some important information in this capacity. More research could be done in the future to provide more specific guidelines regarding the communication between the two groups. When a larger student sample is available, many variables other than student's gender and previous contact can be incorporated for further investigation.

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Table 1

Mean Scores of the Perceived "Organization of Messages"\*

|                                                  | Means | <u>SD</u> |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------|-----------|
| Female ( $\underline{n}$ = 42)                   | 2.95  | 1.17      |
| With Previous Contact ( $\underline{n}$ = 25)    | 2.88  | 1.20      |
| Without Previous Contact ( $\underline{n}$ = 17) | 3.06  | 1.44      |
| Male ( $\underline{n}$ = 37)                     | 2.29  | 0.81      |
| With Previous Contact ( $\underline{n}$ = 23)    | 2.30  | 0.76      |
| Without Previous Contact ( $\underline{n}$ = 14) | 2.29  | 0.91      |

- 1 = "I strong agree that the non-native instructor spoke in an organized fashion."  
5 = "I strongly disagree that the non-native instructor spoke in an organized fashion.")

Table 2

Mean Scores of the Perceived "Clarity of Messages"<sup>\*</sup>

|                                           | Means | <u>SD</u> |
|-------------------------------------------|-------|-----------|
| Female ( <u>n</u> = 42)                   | 3.24  | 1.12      |
| With Previous Contact ( <u>n</u> = 25)    | 3.08  | 1.15      |
| Without Previous Contact ( <u>n</u> = 17) | 3.47  | 1.07      |
| Male ( <u>n</u> = 37)                     | 3.43  | 0.99      |
| With Previous Contact ( <u>n</u> = 23)    | 3.17  | 1.03      |
| Without Previous Contact ( <u>n</u> = 14) | 3.86  | 0.77      |

1 = "I strong agree that the non-native instructor spoke clearly."

5 = "I strongly disagree that the non-native instructor spoke clearly.")